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ABSTRACT

The exploration of movement as it reveals the subconscious and subjective side of individuals is described to illustrate a method of psychological inquiry known as phenomenology. Spontaneous, improvised dance performed by two different couples was video-taped and analyzed. The couples, a man and woman in a courting relationship and two women in a competitive but friendly relationship, were interviewed after the performances to determine their personal feelings during the dance. Observation of the interactions in the bodily movements of the subjects suggested that they revealed deeper and more subtle feelings than were consciously thought and vocalized. (JD)

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MOVING TOGETHER IN IMPROVISATIONAL DANCE: AN EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY*

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In this paper, I would like to illustrate a way of exploring movement in an empirical phenomenological manner. The particular phenomenon I will use is that of two dancers moving together in an improvisational dance. The method and findings I will present are taken from a previous study reflecting my psychological interests (Levi, 1978). Before getting into the method and findings, I will sketch out what I mean by a phenomenological approach to movement and why, as a psychologist, I felt compelled to take it.

The Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology began as a method of philosophical inquiry at the turn of the century. It has developed into a small but growing movement within and across the social sciences. Phenomenologists understand this as a

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response to the "crisis of our times." This crisis can be characterized as the inability of science conceived as natural science, to solve critical life problems (Husserl, 1970). The natural sciences have contributed to the problems of the day but not taking up and including the question of human values nor weighing the meaning of existence in their quest for knowledge. The social sciences, having borrowed the methods of natural science to legitimate their existence, have contributed to this crisis and not found hoped for solutions. The phenomenological movement has sought to reformulate the social sciences as human sciences, to approach critical life problems and the experiences of everyday life as they are lived, in the quest for knowledge that is useful in helping us to understand the situation in which we find ourselves. (Husserl, 1970; Strasser, 1974).

I do not mean to imply that the findings of these sciences are incorrect but, rather, that they are incomplete. Natural science has approached persons as objects of inquiry, as if they were no different from the things of the world. Excluded by this approach is the sense of persons as the source and creators of scientific inquiry; that is, the subjective side of persons. In other words, persons have created the tools to study themselves only as objects and have made the mistake of believing themselves to be nothing more than the objective facts they have collected about themselves. This has resulted in our having a distorted view of ourselves, one which excludes our sense of ourselves as agents in the world, as meaning-givers, as bearers of values, as the ones for whom the facts we collect about ourselves are meaningful. Phenomenology seeks to

develop rigorous and systematic methods that will include our subjectivity even when we are the objects of study (Giorgi, 1970).

From a phenomenological perspective, our sense of ourselves as subjects and as objects are not mutually exclusive categories, as natural science led us to believe, but two ways we experience ourselves in the world with others. Phenomenology asks us to take our experience seriously. This means approaching experience not as the by-product of a neuro-physiological chain of events triggered by random interactions in the physicochemical world, but as the fundamental ground of our knowledge. Experience is not something we possess but that medium through which we are present to the world and others. Phenomenological studies have shown experience as it is lived to be structured in orderly and meaningful ways. What the world, other people, and events in the world mean to us is based on the structure of our experience of such phenomena. Experience is not merely something that happens to us; it is intentional. This means, among other things, that experience always refers beyond itself to a situation; our experience is situated. The experience of being-in-a-situation, for a person, is structured by temporal, spatial, and social horizons of that experience. These horizons are contexts of meaning. The world is the most basic and taken for granted situation in which we live. As such, it is the ultimate ground, or horizon against which our experience becomes meaningful. A study of lived experience therefore, is the means by which we can understand other people and what things mean to them.

As a phenomenological psychologist, I am committed to exploring

human experience as it is lived everyday. I recognize that a person is an experiencing being, whose consciousness of his relating to a particular situation gives meaning to this experience. When I say that experience is situated I also imply that experience is embodied. It is through his body that a person is tied to situations, to others, and ultimately to the world. The lived-body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), conceived phenomenologically, is not the physiological organism that natural science studies. It is an agent body, the body experienced by the person who acts in and with that body.

Movements of the body, then, are imbued with consciousness. Approaching human movement as a physical formation, i.e., considering it to be determined by natural forces outside of one's experience, as natural science would like us to believe, is, thus, secondary to an understanding of movement as intentional. When I say that movement is intentional I do not mean that a person is reflectively aware of, or knows in advance every move he makes. On the contrary, his moving is often prereflective. A person is not aware of all the meanings his movements may convey to others. I use the word "prereflective", rather than "unconscious" to convey the idea that a person is always aware, on some level, of his experience of moving through a situation and that his movements express many levels of his experience, not just those he is explicitly aware of.

A study of movements as they are lived implies an inquiry into the meaning of movements. Taken as intentional formations, movements express the relationship of a person to his world, to others, and even to himself.

They are visible tracings of his experience. As a phenomenological psychologist, I want to understand what a person intends (consciously or otherwise) through his moving, what it refers to, what it traces out. When I understand the intentional structure of a person's movements I learn what it means for him to be in the particular situation or relationship in which he finds himself.

An Empirical Phenomenological Study of Movement

I will now illustrate, in skeletal form, the method and findings of my empirical phenomenological study of movement. The phenomenon I used was "moving together in improvisational dance." This phenomenon refers to those moments in an improvisational situation where dancers appear to move together in a fluid, cohesive manner as if dancing an unwritten choreography. There were several steps in the method of this study. Because of the limitations of space, I can describe these steps in only the briefest, skeletal form and will omit entirely the steps involved in the phenomenological analysis. For those of you who might become intrigued with empirical phenomenological methods, based on the following description of findings of such methods, I refer you to the works of Giorgi, Fischer, VonEckartsberg (1971); Giorgi, Fischer, Murray (1975); Colaizzi (1973); Keen (1975); and Levi (1978).

After I grouped four dance students into two couples, I asked each couple to improvise a dance together to a musical soundtrack. The soundtrack was made up of five short segments of different kinds of

music. These were jazz, environmental sounds, tribal drums, classical, and electronic.

Each couple was videotaped. I used these videotapes throughout the study as a referent for interviews with the dancers and as an empirical "base" for my descriptions. Initially, I looked at each videotape for dance sequences where the dancers were moving well together My criterion for identifying moments when the dancers appeared to be moving well together was when I saw their gestures adhere to one another. Such a sequence I labelled a coherence of gestures, which gestalted against the background of, for example, hesitant, awkward, fumbling movements.

I reduced the videotapes to ten short episodes (five for each couple, representing each of the musical situations) in which the couples' gestures appeared to cohere. In this way, I could study moving together in the improvisational dancing of two different couples across the same five musical situations.

Next, I interviewed each dancer separately while watching the videotape of his/her dancing. The interviews focused on getting the dancers to describe their experience of the sequences where their gestures appeared to cohere. I transcribed the interviews. I indexed the dancers' protocols to the videotapes so that I could compare and contrast the dance partners' experiences within the same episodes of the dance.

Finally, informed by the dancers' experience I described and analyzed the gestural relating of each couple as they moved together

through each of the identified episodes, as I perceived it. Thus, my access to the phenomenon of moving together was twofold. I analyzed the dancers' descriptions of their experience of moving together, getting an "internal" viewpoint anchored in concrete, publicly observable episodes. And, I used descriptions of my own perceptual experience, representing an "external" viewpoint of the phenomenon as it appeared to me in each of the episodes.

Phenomenology, in its most basic form, is a science of rigorous, systematic description that remains faithful to one's experience of the phenomenon one investigates. The idea, from a phenomenological frame of reference, was to explore and describe a sequence of movements, in this case, moving together, as a <u>whole</u>, as a way of access to its principle of organization or intentionality. If, rather than study a coherence of gestures as a whole, one took the more analytic approach of breaking down the sequence into discrete gestures or part-movements, one would be bypassing an empirical fact of observational experience. The analysis of such a sequence into its parts does not include the perceived fluidity or cohesiveness that sets the sequence apart in the first place. The point I would make here is that such analytic approaches presume a principle of organization based on their theory, rather than on a thorough investigation of the experience of moving together as it is lived by particular couples in concrete situations. Using empirical phenomenological methods, we can arrive at an understanding of <u>what it means</u> to move together improvisationally for a particular couple and in general for all couples.

Empirical Findings

Again, due to spatial limitations, I can present my findings in only the briefest fashion. In my analysis of the dancers' descriptions of their experience of moving together, I found that certain aspects of the dance partner's experience were shared while other aspects diverged from this common ground. The partners agreed on the experience of forces and tensions, feeling themselves to be within the same movement, in a sense captured by it. They felt themselves in balance within which leader/follower roles were fluidly reversible. They did not feel their gestures were being manipulated by their partner; in fact, they experienced their gestures as indistinguishable from one another. Moving together was experienced as spontaneous gestural expressions of "just being themselves together", more like a blossoming forth rather than as a series of linear responses. The bodily feel of the movements was described similarly by the dance partners but, they often ascribed divergent personal meanings to those shared experiences.

In order to create a dance out of their gestural relating, dancers surrendered their conscious egos in order to become "body-subjects" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), in a sense lending their bodies to each other and allowing themselves to be taken by the prereflective movements of their bodies. The primary relationship between the dancers, during these moments when they were moving well together I characterized as "intercorporeal" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), and only secondarily as interpersonal. This highlighted the fact that dancers were able to

incorporate conflicting personal intentions in fluid sequences of spontaneous gestures indicating that as a couple they were expressing a complex relationship layered with meaning. Simply put, the dance partners, even within a coherent gestural sequence, were not on the same wave length on all levels of experience. Moving together was not a simple union of self and other, but a highly variegated oneness. Relating at an intercorporeal level, dancers moved prereflectively, i.e., they didn't think out their or their partner's movements, nor screened their feelings. As a result, the dancers spontaneously acted out the personal and interpersonal meanings their relationship as a couple had for them, which in other situations they might have kept to themselves, might not have been in touch with, or might have expressed in more subtle ways without realizing it.

Most of this and more was visible from an observer's stance as my analysis of the descriptions of my perceptual experience revealed. The general structure of the phenomenon was based on the analysis of my descriptions of the coherence of the couples' gestures as they appeared in each episode. I found that each couple had a basically invariant, affectively textured, temporal configuration of gestures whose intercorporeally generated intentionality expressed the personal and interpersonal meaning of the couple's relationship. This structure, I expect, would be enriched and perhaps changed to some degree as more couples are studied. I will illustrate how this structure is concretely lived out by describing the style of each couples dancing.

The style is that which remains the same in the variations of moving together each episode presents. The basic intentionality of couple A (a male, David, and female, Mary) was of a courting relationship, while that of couple B (two females, Chris and Anne) was of a competitive relationship.

Couple A's gestures cohered to one another when they began to move in up, out, in, and down directions, changing levels and creating lines of force that were directed along diagonal axes. The affective texture of their spiralling, intertwining movements was often sensual and erotic, though it ranged from being tender and caring touching to being lyrical and romantic. The courting relationship was visible in this intertwining of bodies, the stretching of limbs along diagonal axes, and the undulations in the couple's turns created by the up, out, in, and down configuration of gestures.

In terms of their interpersonal significance, David's outward and upward gestures often appeared as invitations for Mary to come out of her introspective shell, visible in her sometimes downward and inwardly directed postures which, at times, seemed to express disappointment. In this way, she was often brought out of her shell and lifted into the celebration of the dance. David's dominant expansive gestures were tempered by Mary's less powerful downward and inward directed gestures which created intimate spaces in which the undulations and stretching of their turning, twisting bodies became erotic and romantic. It was as if Mary was trying to keep David grounded and with her as she

began to give herself to him, though often the coherence would break as David's uplifting and expansive gestures, and independent spirit became too much for Mary. He would then continue on his own, with Mary falling back into herself, or he would come back to reinstate their relationship.

Gestural configurations then, are not merely physical pattern, but intentional forms. In this case they express a relationship that has its ups and downs, its invitations, and experiences of being left out. The personal meaning of the relationship for Mary, who "saw" romantic possibilities in relating, was not David's sense of it. In fact, the affective texture of tender sexuality that both dancers experienced revealed a relationship that ranged from secure friendship to romance.

In contrast, couple B's gestures cohered to one another when they began to move in some configuration of back and forth, and side to side directions, facing each other along the same horizontal axes, creating lines of force (often oppositional) along those axes. The affective texture of this configuration was often of oppressive, feisty, yet playful lunging, darting movements. They threw abrupt gestures at each other, like quick spins and parrying movements revealing a relationship that was competitive yet remained friendly. For example, the coherence of their spinning around was created, in part, by the dancers pulling against each other to create equal and oppositional counter forces.

Visible in these often explosive coherences was a continuing interpersonal battle for control and equality in the dance relationship.

Chris most often appeared in control of the dance with her cool cat-like movements and teasing expressions that gave a double edge to her gestures. Her message appeared to be "come dance with me, but watch out for my tricks." Anne, in order to cooperate, became the "fall guy" dancing Chris' dance until frustrated with the role, she challenged Chris for control. Anne's darting and lunging intrusions of Chris' space revealed this frustration and challenge, and served to keep Chris off balance some of the time, undercutting her domination.

Moving together in improvisational dance is not the result of individual conscious acts. Rather, the coherence of dancers gestures expresses a more fundamental intentionality, one generated intercorporeally, i.e., via their spontaneous gestural relating. This fundamental intentionality refers to the meanings (conscious or otherwise) of the dancers' relationship as it is lived by them. I have tried to illustrate that the explication of such meanings is possible through an empirical phenomenological study of movement. It enhances our understanding of human experience and can tell us in specific terms who people are in relation to each other.

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